



When the Worst Fails to Happen.

Our Parashah is, among other things, about the past catching up with you; arriving, literally, on your doorstep with all the baggage that you thought you'd left behind forever. I imagine many of us know the feeling.

At first glance, it's Joseph's past, in the shape of his ten brothers, that drives the plot. His knowledge and power, pitted against their ignorance and vulnerability, sets the stage for a revenge tragedy of classic proportions. But; and this is a big 'but', what we get is the revenge without the tragedy. Joseph plays with them like a cat with a mouse; he terrorises them with the inscrutable power of an absolute state; he bullies and confuses them; he threatens them and throws them in gaol, with hints of worse to come. But in the end, with the ultimate gesture of the powerful, he forgives them. We're so familiar with the story that it perhaps doesn't occur to us to us that Joseph could, in another scenario have acted differently. Because sadly, we feel we can never take compassion for granted; it's so often seen as an exception to the general rule of human brutality, a piece of good fortune, a lucky break. And certainly the brothers don't expect it, trapped as they are in this Kafka-esque nightmare. Their real punishment is terror and uncertainty.

And Joseph has another weapon on his side that he's not even aware of; his brothers are carrying their own burden from the past, the guilt of having destroyed Joseph (so they think) and having effectively destroyed Jacob's life as well, by throwing Joseph's bloodstained coat at his feet. As soon as things go wrong for them in Egypt, they immediately assume that it's a punishment for their great crime, although they have no reason to suppose that there's any connection. You get the feeling that this is a conversation they've had before; an agonised rehearsal of who was responsible for what, or who said what to whom; it's like picking at a sore. But only now, perhaps, do they make the stark and simple reckoning: "We saw the distress of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us." Because they showed no compassion then, they can expect none now. And they're wrong.

We spend so much of our lives expecting the worst, mentally preparing ourselves for Armageddon, whether it's cancer or global warming or nuclear terrorism. We feed off the media, and the media feeds off us in a lethal symbiosis of anxiety and dread. So that we almost fail to notice all the bad things that *don't* happen. And all the wonderful things that do, the acts of generosity and of grace, Hope is less glamorous, less alluring than despair, but expecting the best, of people and of God, isn't naivety; it's the first step towards making it happen.

This optimism, this ultimately positive outlook, is built into the Joseph story. Rather than being littered with bodies, the closing scenes are filled with gestures of reconciliation and redemption. Not because everyone suddenly turns into a saint, but because they reach down into their worn and damaged selves and find the courage to face the possibility of happiness.